

Profits and Losses

In the Life of Joel Chandler Harris

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As a youngster, Joel Chandler Harris was hard-favoured both in appearance and in circumstance. His mother was of a good family (she was born *Harris*), and she proved to be an excellent woman, but in 1848, without conventional reasons she had left her home in a neighbouring community and come, insolvent, to live in Eatonton. Her mother and her quite new son, Joel—both empty handed—arrived that winter almost simultaneously to keep her company.

Joel grew up slight, short, and red-headed—in a day when red hair was not esteemed. He stuttered and he was very shy and very poor. Yet in that town, a sort of capital of Virginia emigrés, he does not seem to have felt himself oppressed. At school, where a benevolent neighbour paid his tuition, he was bright but not studious, bending his energy as boys' energy is bent normally.

The Georgia county of which Eatonton is capital had in 1850 something over ten thousand people, three-fourths of whom were slaves. The lands were already sadly exhausted, but commercial fertilizers were being introduced, and a cotton factory had been built to employ a hundred labourers. People knew there that the entire system of slavery was being violently assailed the world over, but they remembered the prowess in Washington of Mr. Cobb and Mr.

Stephens and Mr. Toombs and thought it unlikely that those gentlemen would let anything happen to Georgia's disadvantage.

There were many people of Northern birth living in Georgia—notably more than in any other Southern state—and they, one noted, tended readily to fall in with Southern ways, abandoning their school-teaching and their merchandizing as soon as they found money enough to buy land and slaves. Occasionally one met the contention that Yankees were universally a bad lot; one prominent and wealthy planter had long gone unshaved, and would remain so, he said, till Georgia seceded from the accursed Union once and for all. Ordinary citizens were incapable of such definite conviction; and besides, American anti-monarchist as they were, they believed that there was one king remaining whom Divinity still definitely sponsored: namely, cotton. Even New Englanders would have more discretion than to deal with that King too lightly. On the whole one found one's self more scandalized over the new-fangledness of the Governor, in banning wine from his table, than over the goings-on of W. L. Garrison.

For all young Joe Harris could tell, he was in as stable a world as ever turned. From time to time one heard murmurs of the possibility of a great slave insurrection; but the negroes Joe knew were kindly—the women fetched out cakes for him and the men took him hunting—and above all, there was the statement about racial antagonisms made by an important man in Eatonton. People who are kind to their negroes, this man had been accustomed to say, have no cause ever to be afraid of them.

Joe had no reason to suspect the weakness of that dictum as a solution, and the fact that it was considered a solution is itself interesting. In his innocence the gentleman who promulgated it could not conceive that he might suffer at the hands of someone *else's* slaves—whom, manifestly, he could never have injured. The fact that an individual might identify himself so thoroughly with one class (or race) as to condemn and hate all individuals in another class (or race) seemed to him preposterous. He did not himself do that for the white race, and he could not believe any human creature steeped, that far, in perversion.

The essential gathering of Joe's boyhood, then, concerning human relationships, was that if people make other people love them the world will somehow hold together. All this was instinctive with him, and his experience had strengthened his instinct. He knew it so well that he was hardly conscious of it as a conviction. That is why it governed him wholly, and why also at the age of thirteen, it did not keep him from going to the village post-office and reading news out of other people's newspapers. While he was there, one day, he saw a batch of papers that was unfamiliar to him—the first edition of *The Countryman*, published by Mr. Joseph Addison Turner, on his plantation eleven miles from Eatonton. Mr. Turner advertised that he wanted a young fellow to learn printing and to help him with *The Countryman* and to live during the process at *his* house. That was Joe's opportunity. He took it.

Mr. Turner with his brother owned a large plantation, Turnwold, and many negroes, and a hat factory, and two pretentious houses stocked with a well-se-

lected library of about four thousand volumes. He had been a member of the Georgia legislature, and his brother had written a novel, *Jack Hopeton*, which had appeared first serially in the *Southern Field and Fireside* (Augusta) and later in book form in New York. He thought that lawyers were a curse, and that the great trouble with the South was that too great a proportion of its best minds went into politics. In that field they did as well as people from other sections, but concessions won by them for their districts could not hold unless the people at large in those districts developed a well-rounded civilization and so justified the concessions.

Personally, Mr. Turner was an original. He proved himself conventional in part by consciously lowering the tone of his paper, after a while, to increase his subscription list, but he refused to compromise himself by taking into Eatonton for sale the hats made at his plantation factory. He had the hats, all right—fine beavers, wool hats, rabbit, and mixed hats, but whoever wanted one could come to his plantation for it if he wanted it keenly enough. "I am not going to turn peddler", he warned in his paper, "and haul hats backward and forwards to Eatonton. You have already imposed too much upon my good nature. *Quousque, tandem, abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra.*"

He was persistently a sort of grandee. "It is entirely foreign to the nature of a gentleman", he wrote once in his paper, "to advertise himself or to drum for subscribers. I have got my consent to advertise, but to drum, never! I could not under any circumstances ask men to subscribe for my paper. It is not genteel to do so."

The time Harris spent with the Turners (from the time he was thirteen until he was seventeen) and in their library and with their negro slaves, was fateful. Fateful for the country, of course: those were the years of the War; but fateful also for the youthful Harris—he left them knowing that he was going to be a writer; and no bombastic writer either, but one, he thought, like Mr. Goldsmith.

After leaving Turnwold, Harris worked for a while with the *Macon Telegraph*, and with the *Crescent Monthly* in New Orleans. "Nursing a novel in his brain", he returned to Georgia at nineteen (1867) and took a position in Forsyth on the *Monroe Advertiser*. Here he knew a town character, an old negro called Uncle Remus, but that was incidental. His main interest was in his newspaper work, particularly in the bright, incisive little comments he stuck here and there between articles of more length and seriousness.

Those paragraphs made a name for him, and in 1870 he went to work in Savannah, at what seemed to him the handsome salary of forty dollars a week. His new job was with the *Savannah Morning News*, edited by Colonel W. T. Thompson, himself a humourist of considerable fame in the forties and fifties. An up-country bumpkin of twenty-two, stunted and pale, Harris did not seem prepossessing to his colleagues on that prime daily of the state in that serene, coastal capital. Was the critter Colonel Thompson had brought in, they wished to know, human or not human—had he been caught in a fish trap or in a net?

But his clever paragraphs palliated them—for example: "The coloured people of Macon celebrated the birthday of Lincoln again on Wednesday. This is the

third time since October"; "There will have to be another amendment to the civil rights bill. A negro boy in Covington was attacked by a sow lately and narrowly escaped with his life. We will hear next that the sheep have banded together to mangle the downtrodden race."

In 1873 Harris was married to Esthel La Rose, daughter of a French Canadian who owned shipping interests in Savannah and who lived there part of each year. She was a Catholic, and a very lovely and lovely-looking girl. His life with her then, and until his death, was romantically happy, and it was on account of her safety and that of their two children that he fled from Savannah in the yellow fever epidemic of 1876, and went to Atlanta. In the midst of that grimness Harris, gilded by his glittering era and too thoroughly a good newspaper wit, *would* have his joke. He registered at the Kimball House: "J. C. Harris, one wife, two bow-legged children, and a bilious nurse."

Coming from Savannah to Atlanta in 1876 meant a great deal. It meant Chicago instead of New Orleans, railways instead of river-traffic, Henry Grady instead of Colonel Thompson, Chester A. Arthur instead of Thomas Jefferson. It would not mean that Harris's pithy comments, which had already made him one of the best known editors in the state, must be stifled. It would mean that he would hardly again, as he had vigorously done in Savannah, oppose a national collusion of Southern Democrats and Liberal Northern Republicans such as the one that had furthered Horace Greeley.

The flight from Savannah had been temporary, but the desolation after the plague there made it impossible

for the *News* to pay as liberally as it had done formerly, and Harris settled in Atlanta, with Evan P. Howell and Henry Grady on the *Atlanta Constitution*. Howell was at the time in his late thirties, Harris twenty-eight, Grady twenty-six. The men and the occasion had met, and the *Constitution* under them became perhaps the most influential journalistic force so far seen in the South.

Sitting round his camp after Appomattox, L. Q. C. Lamar, that Georgia-bred Mississippian, had heard despondent talk, indeed, from his fellow officers. Many of them planned to abandon the South—some to go North, some to quit America entirely. Even Jackson's chaplain, the Reverend Richard L. Dabney, was of that mind. Let the geographic South be abandoned, he urged, but let the spiritual South at all hazards be perpetuated—and the way to do that was to effect a wholesale migration of Southern people to Brazil. Lamar spoke very nobly then against all such doctrine—the Dabney talk was visionary—and as for abandoning the South, he would not do that; he had helped involve it in its difficulties, and he felt himself impelled to help extricate it. Not everybody took that exalted attitude. Pickings were better North, people told themselves, and North they went, some to blot out whatever Southern implications they retained (until those implications became fashionable in the next generation), and others to recoup themselves there in hope of returning later—exiled for the moment by poverty. A number of people went from Georgia, most notably the authors Richard Malcolm Johnston and Sidney Lanier. ("You are all so alive up there, and we are all so dead down here," Lanier had written to a Northern

friend.) Harris himself had considered going, though he should with regret, he said, give up ruralizing.

But at last the South seemed to be taking hold again, and Atlanta was reaping the rewards of the New Order, if any Southern city was. It had been burned, but it was finer now than before (witness that bright jewel, the Kimball House), and it was natural for the beneficiaries of the New Order to formulate their thesis. This thesis was a mixed one, and so, likely to fare far. It was that Southern men before 1860 were the finest men ever seen anywhere, but unfortunately quite wrong in all their conceptions except that of private virtue—which they really need not have worried about since *that*, somehow, could be trusted to look out for itself. That was its thesis. Its program was, while speaking reverently, always, of the past, to repudiate that past as rapidly as ever one might—with one exception, that the nigger be kept to his place. That was a rock that was to bottle many bays, but somehow the New Order planned to over-leap it. The plan seemed logical, and promised wealth and strength for the hallowed Southland. It met with response in places beyond Georgia's borders, even in New York.

In Georgia, perhaps, it had more resounding names to sponsor it or to seem to sponsor it than it had elsewhere. There were General Longstreet, Governor Brown, Alex Stephens (vaguely), and Benjamin H. Hill. In Congress Lamar had furthered conciliation by his eloquent eulogy on Sumner and, if one were of a disposition to take poets seriously, one might consider young Sidney Lanier, at that time writing for the Philadelphia Exposition poetry that was full of talk about the sacredness of the Union.

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The pulpit, too, had its influence. For the grave-minded Bishop Atticus Haygood argued persuasively that without *any* progress, one achieves nothing better than extinction. "If you can't fly," he quoted from an early idol of his, without a full recognition of spiritual implications, "run; if you can't run, walk; if you can't walk, crawl; if you can't crawl, worm it along." And for the less grave-minded, the Reverend Sam Jones epigrammatized the new and increasingly general sentiment. "I am tired", he said, "of singing always *The Sweet Bye and Bye*; let's sing *The Sweet Now and Now* for a spell."

"Worm it along," Bishop Haygood had said. Well, many did, and many would, and many do—just how nearly literally the good Bishop probably did not know. Hardly anybody knew—least of all Grady and Harris. America was a very phenomenal thing however one looked at it; fortunes had grown here at a rate unprecedented in History, and generally, one held, as a work of God's favour. Surely one could not doubt the extension of that favour to a man who, like Commodore Vanderbilt, had given under the auspices of a Methodist Bishop, a round million dollars for Southern education.

An occasional Jeremiah uttered doleful prophecies. As late (or might one better say *as early*?) as 1891, Colonel C. C. Jones of Augusta set his mind forth about the matter in one impassioned sentence. "Under the absurd guise of a new South," he thundered, "flaunting the banners of utilitarianism, lifting the standards of speculation and expediency, elevating the colours whereon are emblazoned consolidation of wealth and centralization of government, lowering the

flag of intellectual, moral, and refined supremacy in the presence of the petty guidons of ignorance, personal ambition, and diabolism, supplanting the iron cross with the golden calf, and crooking

... the pregnant hinges of the knee
Where thrift may follow fawning,

not a few there are who, ignoring the elevating influence of heroic impulses, manly endeavour, and virtuous sentiments, would fain convert this region into a money-worshipping domain; and, careless of the landmarks of the fathers, impatient of the restraints of a calm, enlightened, conservative civilization, viewing with indifferent eye the tokens of Confederate valour, and slighting the graves of Confederate dead, would counsel no oblation save at the shrine of Mammon."

But sentiments like this were vain in that day; the very axis of the world inclined otherwise. People in general did not recognize how widely large-scale corruption was diffused. The sinister aspects of urbanization, the sundering of actual human relationships in corporate industry, were beyond their imagination. For Harris, cheerfulness was in the air, youth was in his heart, Henry Grady in his office.

But the *Constitution* staff was not blind. Grady spoke and Harris wrote through those years (both through their respectable Democracy—no populists they) with as much clarity and force as ever Tom Watson did against the abuses of their time. In their romantic bravado they could not believe that any system could persist in its unethical phases despite the concerted will of human beings. In their simple lofti-

ness of spirit they could not believe that human beings, once aware of an unethical manifestation, would fail to exercise their concerted will to crush that manifestation. They placed the blame, then, on certain developments of the industrial order in the North; but they thought those malign developments not inherent in industrialism, and they invited industrialism South, feeling that here all that was evil would be extirpated. Given good men, no system can behave badly in their hands.

It is a doctrine that to this day has its forceful advocates. And Grady (and Harris with him) did want to see the South strong—strong, strong—and swift. If he had a hundred thousand immigrants to bring to Georgia, Grady said, and he wished he had, he would send five thousand to Atlanta, twenty thousand to the farms, and seventy-five thousand to the factories. He looked forward to the time when no Georgia river could reach the sea without turning in its progress ten thousand spindles—"for look you, in my lifetime I shall see our country with a hundred and fifty million people."

From 1886, when he made his famous speech in New York, till his death in 1889, Grady was one of the most prominent figures in America. When he died, great men sent messages and poets poetized and divines moralized and many simple people who had not seen him, wept. His friends in Atlanta put forth as a memorial to him a substantial volume containing a great part of his writings, and some other material ranging from a commendatory notice of the *Constitution*, through many testimonials of Grady's virtue, to a memorial sermon in which the Reverend DeWitt

Talmadge argues that though great, a man may be a Christian. The biographical sketch in this volume was Harris's.

Clearly, it seemed to Harris that one of the major luminaries of time had suddenly gone out. "From that time," he says, speaking of Grady's first appearance in New York, "he knew that his real mission was that of Pacificator. There was a change in him from that day forth. He put away something of his boyishness; his purpose developed into a mission." But the King was dead, now, and Harris must have known, in spite of his sincere and perpetual modesty, that the King of *all that*, in Georgia, now, was himself. And he was not made for kingship; his mind was full, always, of modifications.

A modern historian inquiring how it was that Southern leaders were so intent to effect the grand Reconciliation, will doubtless prove before long that they were actuated by economic motives. And he can sustain his case by specific reference to Grady's speeches. A fact one can sustain also, but more by general acquaintance with Grady than by reference to isolated statements of his, is that he wanted reconciliation because he was a generous and lovable human being who winced always under any manifestation of surliness.

That was Harris's case also. He could swear well that in his heart he was not surly, for instance, about the Negro, and he knew hardly anybody else who was surly on that score. It provoked him to observe the constant clamour in Northern newspapers about his and his friends' being governed wholly by impulses which they indeed rarely recognized. He believed that

those imputations were founded in an evil passion that had in all conscience lived past its just day, but he thought the accusers sincere, if ignorant, in fact, of what motivated them.

His Uncle Remus sketches, undertaken at first as part of his newspaper work, exhibited his actual attitude as he lived, surely the reverse of surliness. When it was apparent to him that they were being read everywhere and that he as their author had been elevated, despite his protests, to a forum as influential as almost any in America, he must have worked consciously to make those stories propagandist in nature. He must have realized after a few years that his propaganda, through Uncle Remus, had proved effective, and he could tell himself with all justice that much sectional rancour had evaporated before that old man's wit.

These sketches had shown, by implication, the kindness that had existed in the ancient South between masters and slaves—and that is what, in the North, had been most seriously in doubt. He had tackled that rancour, too, in his *Constitution* editorials and in the numerous non-dialect essays he had published in Northern magazines. Sweetness and light were his weapons, Matthew Arnold one of his chief smiths. To the South, he said this: Treat Negroes as you would like to be treated in their position and don't make yourself equally criminal with irresponsible Yankees by getting angry when they upbraid the Southern attitude about Negroes. To the North he said this: First ask yourself if what you are angry about really happened—then ask yourself if you might not have acted similarly under similar conditions. To both he said:

Remember that the other fellow is human only, and above all (oh, above all) that you are also; pity him for his error, help him to avoid it, do not abuse him.

He determined at last to show the kindness which had existed in the ancient South among white people toward one another—the direct personal kindness that makes affection—which *had* existed, and which existed still among country people. For country people, he explained (writing when America was already almost preponderantly urban—*he could not believe it*) are really the *typical* Americans. So he wrote much to this end, stories and novels which never achieved the popularity of the Uncle Remus material, but which are none the less valid. He spoke oftenest of one Billy Sanders, most properly placed, as to character, as a lower middle-class white man, considerably better than a cracker—no polished gem, but a shrewd, shrewd brother, only more kind than shrewd. As to geography, Billy was placed in Georgia, circulating between two actual villages—Shady Dale and Harmony Grove. But to Harris's great distress people in Harmony Grove protested against his making sport of them by using their town's name, and shortly afterward, in very shame, re-christened the town (if one may say so) *Commerce*.

The doctrine of Progress had caught hold in Georgia vengefully; the cities grew and the country dwindled. In 1880 hardly a tenth of the people lived in towns; in 1900 more than a fifth did. Atlanta, with a population of about ten thousand in 1860, had about ninety thousand in 1900—the largest city between Baltimore and New Orleans. Atlanta was like the rest of America now—let men hope, for the better. In

Savannah, still, one did not have to run to catch a street car. That seemed quaint to Harris in 1900, a reminder of the distant past.

His personal affairs, except in money (he never made a great deal), had advanced as rapidly as those of his city. Learned gentlemen the world over wrote to him about his contributions to folk-lore. Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson and Mr. Sam Clemens wrote to him, and Mr. Cable wrote, and at times he visited such gentlemen. President Roosevelt wrote to him often, and at last coaxed him to visit the White House. And once at a banquet in Atlanta Roosevelt reminded people that in having Harris they had incomparably a bigger lion present (though a very meek, benign lion) than they had in having *him*, who, as a mere President, was doomed to something like oblivion. Presidents, he had said, come and go, but Uncle Remus stays put. So the world stood with Harris in his early fifties.

Now, whatever are the compensations of being fifty, there are certain difficulties before a man then that he has not had to reckon with formerly. In Harris's own mind, these difficulties were grave. So many people he loved were dead, and much harder of access than so many people he did not love. And there was the matter of his body, pudgy, leaden when it approached staircases. He had money now to deck that body out in good clothing, and to keep his hands immaculate. But to what purpose? Let him groom himself ever so carefully in anticipation of a visit with Mr. Walter Page, Mr. Page only went away to marvel at his unkempt appearance.

But all of that was superficial, and did not satisfactorily explain the sense of futility that, glowering at

him, at first, from around unexpected corners, came at length to sit beside him often and boldly, when he had been feeling happiest. He was out of accord with so many things that people about him seemed to set store by. People seemed so prone, after for a long time repudiating a good idea, to accept that idea nominally, and contort its meaning to their own convenience. Grady had said: "Put business above politics." That was wholesome enough as a doctrine of work, and as a deflation for incompetent people who had been elevated to high political office for sentimental reasons only. That catchword had worked business was above politics at last in Georgia too—and let nobody doubt it—but not in a way any righteous man would have designed.

And that troubled him. An individualist, he could not reconcile himself to a highly complex and paternalistic government. Corporations were individuals and yet he abominated the abuses of corporate monopolies. A countryman, he was fretted by so much talk about it all—and so much and so much. He only wanted people to do right.

He was, in short, for all his talk of realism, a romanticist, and he was mainly ignorant of the teeming world of cities and not at home there. And he believed that men had hearts still as they had had long ago in Eaton; and he believed that people should let the kindest dictates of their hearts actuate them always. But he was a realist, too, and he observed that all this was not happening.

Could it be that in teaching the hard lesson of *sectional* sympathy he had been ambushed, as it were by forces destructive of the personal, human sympathy

which he had somehow taken for granted? Could it be that in their blundering way the old irreconcilables had been accidentally half-right in their denunciation of the North? He was himself not of a disposition to denounce anything, and he did not believe the irreconcilables had been capable of much discrimination in their thinking; but if by the *North* they had meant the new way of life, he was himself at last a sort of rebel again. It was a swift life, standardized, efficient, pushing, hard, firm, isolated, viewing with equal warmth of affection (because the sum in each case was precisely zero) one's fellow Georgians and the residents not only of Boston but of Burma.

All of this, too, was bewildering, and he sought solace where he could. He spent much time in his garden; Snap Bean Farm, he called it. He marvelled incessantly at birds. He speculated about religion. And slowly he resolved to follow his wife into the Catholic Church.

Atlanta was strong, now, and swift—God knows how swift. Not Mr. Grady's home, nor the like of it, was the center of social life there, as it had once been, but some club was, with gentlemen nibbling caviar and planning to squeeze out their competitors; with ladies opening with a brisk prayer some meeting calculated to strengthen them in their snobbery of blood or ancestry, or of some other thing. Oh, it was scheming *now*, and organization, and the devil take the hindmost—except, that is, if the hindmost knocked at some *appropriately* remote door, as for example, that of some Community Chest. And what those gentlemen needed, and those ladies, was neighbour-knowledge, an actual personal contact with people, who, less com-

petent than they, less glittering, (perhaps only less fortunate) were none the less in the one transcendent item of humanity, identical.

There was need, indeed, that the mocking birds sing valiantly now, and that Snap Bean Farm fruit and flower well, and that Mother Church swing her censers faithfully. And they all did. And the somewhat canonized Uncle Remus smiled valiantly, if wistfully, and proclaimed his world the best of all worlds possible.

In 1900, he resigned from the *Constitution* to devote himself to pure letters, but in 1906 he again ventured into journalism by establishing a monthly periodical devoted to literature and current topics. He wanted it named *The Optimist*, but his promoters persuaded him to call it *Uncle Remus's Magazine*; the trade value of that title, they explained, was too great for it to be neglected. Here he re-enunciated his old program—his and Grady's of 1880—in favour of a broad understanding, and of sweetness and light brought to bear upon every question arising between North and South or between nation and nation.

But his instinct recognized more accurately than his intelligence that those principles did not at that time require the prime emphasis, and what he actually talked of most was the necessity of *individuals'* knowing one another and loving one another, at whatever cost, at however great an apparent waste. It was really not so hard for a man in Atlanta to keep his ire and his rapaciousness down in regard to Boston, Massachusetts; his more immediate task was to keep them down in regard to his neighbour, and the best way for him to do that was for him to know his neighbour. It

was hard in 1906 for one to do that, and he, Joe Harris, had perhaps furthered the conditions that had made it harder, and perhaps he and Henry Grady had been misguided in their guiding; no, not Grady—let his lips be sealed before he would say that! Perhaps, then, *he* had been misguided. Then let him qualify his old teaching—and so he did qualify it, romanticizing about old colonels, who though still hot against Sherman, yet whittled charmingly for children; about the birds, over and over; about his collards, which grew sedately and would not be speeded up by advertising programs; and about young creatures who somehow, absurdly wise, value people more by what they are than by what they have or do.

When he died in 1908, his family set these appropriate words of his on his grave stone. They are beautiful words and they testify to a lovely though no longer ebullient spirit:

“I seem to see before me the smiling faces of thousands of children—some young and fresh and some wearing the friendly marks of age, but all children at heart—and not an unfriendly face among them. And while I am trying hard to speak the right word, I seem to hear a voice lifted above the rest, saying: ‘You have made some of us happy.’ And so I feel my heart fluttering and my lips trembling and I have to bow silently, and turn away and hurry into the obscurity that fits me best.”